

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 59 | Number 1 (Winter 2000)

pps. 81-83

From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2000 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

"From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet." *The Annals of Iowa* 59 (2000), 81-83.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.10327>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

of the Graybeards, though the regiment is frequently mentioned in Civil War histories concerning Iowa. *The Graybeards* is an attempt "to step into the breach" and bring some substance to the legend.

The attempt is successful in two crucial ways. The first is as a history of the regiment. Anyone seeking information on the subject now has a place to turn. One learns of the duties performed by the Graybeards and of the controversies concerning the performance of those duties. They weren't all lovable old guys, and they didn't necessarily get light duty and easy discipline. Until an enterprising scholar writes a full-scale narrative of the 37th, this book will serve as the standard.

The other strength of the book is as a means of bringing alive the voices of the past. There are no substitutes for primary sources, and that is what is offered. The book is a compilation of letters by Major Lyman Allen and his wife and selections from the diary of Viola Baldwin, Lyman's stepdaughter. Their words give unique insights into the daily lives of men and women caught up in their corner of the war. Baldwin's diary entries give the book much of its depth. Although she says little about military matters or politics, her words present readers with an account of a young woman trying to maintain a life of nineteenth-century respectability under difficult circumstances.

The Graybeards is successful as a reference book, but is not necessarily an enjoyable read. Footnotes would have served better than endnotes; biographical material could have been better presented; and the publisher could have allowed for a larger type—"graybeard" readers will need their glasses for this one. The text is well documented, the "biographical sketches" of the regiment's commanders contain much useful information, and the photos enhance the work, but as a literary experience, *The Graybeards* is disappointing. There is nothing, beyond the reader's own curiosity, to draw one into the story of the regiment or the lives of the people who wrote the letters and diary. But the book's subject matter earns it a place in the Iowa Civil War bibliography.

From Mission to Madness: Last Son of the Mormon Prophet, by Valeen Tippetts Avery. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xii, 357 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY MARK Y. HANLEY, TRUMAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The life of David Hyrum Smith, youngest son of Mormon Prophet Joseph Smith Jr., did little to alter the course of Mormon history. In uncovering the individual hopes and collective aspirations that church

leaders, family members, and David himself placed upon that life, however, Valeen Tippetts Avery provides a window onto the deeply personal struggles that shadowed the Mormons' quest for doctrinal and institutional stability.

While insanity grounded David's soaring intellectual and religious ambition by age 32, his youthful maturity, brilliant mind, and creativity offered a promise of spiritual leadership coveted by both Brigham Young's Utah flock and their midwestern rivals, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS). The latter group, led by David's brother Joseph Smith III, rejected Young's vigorous defense of polygamy. Raised in Nauvoo, Illinois, David and brother Joseph early embraced their mother Emma's strong anti-polygamy stand, as well as her protective deception that their father had never preached or practiced the doctrine. Missionary trips to Utah and the testimony of a host of witnesses finally reconciled David to the truth his mother so resented.

Avery draws on a rich store of family correspondence, as well as David's many poems (quoted liberally throughout the text) that reveal the personal warmth and emotional sensitivity that endeared him to family members. It was his deeply spiritual nature and powerful preaching, however, that led Mormons to christen him the "Sweet Singer of Israel." His pulpit eloquence, missionary trips that reached from Michigan to California, doctrinal bouts with Utah leaders, and frequent debates with orthodox Protestant stalwarts all added to the image of a leader with almost limitless potential.

David's devotion to the world of ideas, however, also led to incompetence in practical affairs and a lifelong poverty that kept him from adequately providing for his wife Clara and only son Elbert. The resulting personal embarrassment and mental stress, Avery suggests, contributed to David's occasional forays beyond the limits of RLDS orthodoxy. During one Utah sojourn, he explored spiritualism, participated in seances led by friend Amasa Lyman, and interacted with the freethinking "Godbeites," a dissident band devoted to discrediting Brigham Young's group. In an 1872 letter penned on the eve of his mental collapse, he even warmed to Enlightenment principles, telling brother Joseph that "reason is our only guide. You accept such principles of religion as are consistent to you—I to me" (203).

For reasons that available evidence cannot explain—and Avery appropriately avoids speculation—the light of reason dimmed for David. In 1877 his family committed him to the Illinois State Hospital for the Insane, where he remained until his death in 1904.

Avery's book is well written, although her meticulous dissection of personal correspondence and narrow focus on David's personal travails in the last half of the book may become tedious for general readers. Likewise, her analysis of David's poetry occasionally suggests more insight into his motivation than seems apparent to this reader. Ironically, David's story is overshadowed early in the book by Avery's compelling portrait of Emma Smith as family counsel and formidable opponent to Brigham Young. Young's often acerbic attacks on Emma's character and purpose—particularly with regard to disputes over polygamy and David's prophetic destiny in the Mormon movement—reveal the influence of a woman taken very seriously by her rivals. While Young struggled to promote the Saints' gathering in Utah, Emma's firm guidance and enormous personal will shaped the spiritual development of her sons and prevented the Utah branch from ignoring the Mormon Prophet's midwestern legacy.

Avery's sympathetic examination of a life undone by mental illness also serves as an essential guide to the personal struggles that gave rise to competing regional visions of Mormon purpose.

The History of Wisconsin, Volume 4, The Progressive Era, 1893–1914, by John D. Buenker. Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1998. xviii, 734 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendix, index. \$40.00 cloth.

REVIEW BY DAVID B. DANBOM, NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

This is the fourth volume in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin's ambitious project to recount the history of the state in six comprehensive treatments by accomplished historians. No aspect of this important state is more significant than its progressive reform movement, which established Wisconsin as a national political model and made Robert LaFollette one of the most important figures of his generation. John Buenker, a scholar of progressive reform with a distinguished scholarly career, is well qualified to tell this story.

Buenker devotes the first half of the book to an exhaustive examination of the factors that stimulated the rise of reform in Wisconsin. He details economic developments in agriculture, lumbering, commerce, transportation, and industry, the changing nature of work, the emergence of an industrial working class, the rise of cities, and the influx of immigrants, all of which created economic and social stresses and strains that cried out for alleviation. This is mostly old-style history, with gender considered only briefly and as an afterthought, though there is excellent treatment of Wisconsin's Indians.

Copyright of Annals of Iowa is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.